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TO RULSDMK/DEPT OF TRANSPORTATION WASHINGTON DC 0125
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RUEHRH/AMEMBASSY RIYADH 4293
RUEHJI/AMCONSUL JEDDAH 3362
RUCNAFG/AFGHANISTAN COLLECTIVE
RUEAIIA/CIA WASHINGTON DC
RHMCSUU/FAA NATIONAL HQ WASHINGTON DC
RUCPDO/DEPT OF COMMERCE WASHINGTON DC

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DEPT FOR SCA/FO, SCA/RA, SCA/A, and EEB/TRA/OTP
DEPT PASS AID/ANE
TREASURY FOR LMCDONALD, ABAUKOL, BDAHL, AND MNUGENT
COMMERCE FOR DEES, CHOPPIN, AND FONOVICH
FAA FOR RAY SMITH
RIYADH PASS TO DHARAN

SENSITIVE

SIPDIS

E.O. 12958 N/A

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SUBJECT: AFGHAN MINISTER OF TRANSPORT SACKED AMID ALLEGATIONS OF
CORRUPTION AND MISHANDLING OF HAJJ TRAVEL

¶1. (SBU) In a November 10 cabinet meeting, President Karzai abruptly dismissed Minister of Transport and Civil Aviation (MoTCA) Hamidullah Qaderi on the charge that Qaderi had mishandled preparations for 2008 Hajj travel. Hajj flights from Afghan cities were to begin November 8. However, the Saudi- Malaysian joint venture NAS/Global charter airline with which Minister Qaderi contracted for flights said it could not provide planes to transport Afghan pilgrims to Saudi Arabia, perhaps because of a late Afghan contract payment. President Karzai has asked the Attorney General to investigate Qaderi for corruption in handling the contract. MoTCA officials told Econoff that Mr. Qaderi is at home under house arrest. President Karzai has named his chief economic advisor Dr. Omar Zakhilwal as acting Minister of Transport and Civil Aviation and head of the Hajj committee. Zakhilwal reportedly says his appointment is only temporary, until the Hajj mess is sorted out.

¶2. (SBU) Econoff met with Minister Qaderi's senior advisor for economic and budget issues, Dr. Mohammad Azizi. Looking harried, Azizi explained that the Attorney General's office had been questioning him throughout the day. Azizi believed they were trying to implicate him in some wrongdoing, and he was reportedly also arrested later in the day. Azizi said that high-level officials in MoTCA, namely Deputy Minister for Technical Operations Mr. Raz Mohammed Alami, a 40-year veteran of MoTCA, Deputy Minister for Administration and Finance Mr. Razak, and senior advisor Dr. Rasouli, have all been critical of Minister Qaderi and may have schemed to create false corruption charges as payback for Qaderi's reforms within the ministry and his recent firing of MoTCA Deputy Minister for Planning Mr. Insaf.

¶3. (SBU) However, newly-appointed Deputy Minister of Commerce Adib Farhady told Econ Counselor that there are serious allegations relating to Qaderi's connections to NAS/Global airline and that there may be something to these charges. Local news reports are leading with the corruption allegations. Farhady, who attended the stormy cabinet meeting, said Qaderi had reassured the President for weeks that planning for the Hajj was going smoothly. When Hajj Minister Shahrani complained in the meeting that the flights had not started on time and pilgrims were piling up in departure points with no place to sleep, Qaderi blamed the charter carrier. When Qaderi admitted he had paid the carrier a \$10 million advance (required by the contract), Karzai blew up, accused Qaderi of incompetence, fired him on the spot, and called the Attorney General. Farhady said the corruption allegation relates to a friend of Qaderi's who is a

partner in NAS/Global. Karzai immediately named Zakhilwal to be acting minister, and he is now scrambling to rescue the Hajj operation.

14. (SBU) COMMENT: Hajj operations are a highly sensitive matter here and present perennial difficulties of one kind or another for the Afghan government. Qaderi had promised to fix things this year and appeared to have a plan. President Karzai's abrupt decision to dismiss him reflects his intense frustration that things have again gone south and his government is seen as incompetent. Although it is too soon to evaluate the corruption allegations against Qaderi, Post is aware of no hard evidence against him, and there was no indication until the Hajj mis-step that Karzai was dissatisfied with Qaderi's performance. Qaderi was a reform-minded executive with a business background, and his efforts to bring new blood into the ailing ministry during his seven-month tenure had earned him respect from many corners but enemies in others. Qaderi took over the Hajj operations from Hajj Minister Shahrani in late summer, denying this ministry the cut it is thought to have regularly taken from fare-paying pilgrims in past years. It is certainly possible that Qaderi's enemies within the cabinet and MoTCA have worked to undermine him. END COMMENT.

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